

Keitelman Gallery

ME&MYSELF AND I THE COUNTESS OF CASTIGLIONE AND...

08.09 -30.11.2017

OPENING (5-9pm) THURSDAY 07.09

Thursday – Saturday 12 to 6pm

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Behind the Mirror is an exhibition that underlines the fascinating relationship between the 19th century and the 21st century, in that it is centered on the work of a pioneer of photography whose work in many ways announces the relationship that we have with photographs today. This unique personality of the 19th century is none other than the Countess of Castiglione, whose life alone deserves a novel and whose work proves to be extraordinary.

Born Virginie Oldoini in 1837, this woman from Tuscan nobility married François Verasis, Count of Castiglione, in 1854. He was aide-de-camp to Victor-Emmanuel II of Savoy, King of Sardinia and Piedmont. She bore him a son, but soon began to lead a life of decadence, collecting lovers and using her charms for especially political purposes. It is thus that we find her in Paris, where she would seduce Napoleon III at a time when the nation of Italy's status was still unclear.

Beyond this extravagant life, what distinguishes her is the creative work she initiated in the 1850s with the French photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson, for whom she posed as a model before soon reversing the roles, in a way, as she passionately directed the staging of the shots, the accessories, her poses and her acting. More than just portraits, we see self-directed portraits. In these images there is a narcotic vis-à-vis that takes place: a narcissistic gaze upon oneself, on the image one wishes to transmit to others, on the image of a social class and its ornaments, and on allegorical figures stemming from the history of art, particularly present in the world of engraving, where the origin of photography was seen. We also see the transition between painting and photography as the black and white prints were originally readily colored and touched up by hand to correct imperfections or to make the image more realistic.

In a word, we can see the origins of "the selfie" that with new technologies has spread like wildfire in recent years to the point of becoming almost a "new genre" of photography. The work of the Countess de Castiglione is precisely there to show us how the origin of selfies goes back a long way. In the world of art, one can also see striking echoes of the images of the Countess in later works, first by Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman, and later by Gilbert & Georges. She is also seen more recently in the works of Sophie Calle and Ryan Trecartin.

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The titles given to the images are also very interesting. We are not far from the world of caricature à la Honoré Daumier, although it is more ambiguous and subtle, as one continually swings back and forth on the tenuous thread of the real and the pastiche. An anecdote that speaks volumes about the titles is this: in 1863, she received an invitation to a costume ball at the Tuileries. She appeared there as Queen of Etruria, but the costume is misunderstood. The countess, it was said, attended this ball nearly naked. The press went wild. Her ex-husband, Francois, threatened to take back their son Georges. She responded to this threat by sending a haughty photograph of herself which she called, "The Vengeance."

The Countess of Castiglione continued to create images with the photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson in the last years of her life, in a time of poverty and isolation, audaciously and consciously superimposing her beauty of yesterday with the end of her life's decline. The ultimate artistic attitude of female dandy who had led a decisive existential experience around the photograph, whose significance is now coming to light.